

Developmental Trauma

"Paradoxically, the more we try to change ourselves, the more we prevent change from occurring. On the other hand, the more we allow ourselves to fully experience who we are, the greater the possibility of change."

Laurence Heller

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) had been for a long time the diagnosis for a range of symptoms following experiences that overwhelmed the individual. However, the impact of a one off traumatic event (such as a road traffic accident or RTA) is different to the impact of a series of recurring events (such as a soldier in a series of conflict situations) and different again to someone who experienced either a one off or a repeated series of overwhelming experiences (such as abuse).

The outcome was that the presentation and symptoms of the types of experiences of someone abused in childhood could not be classified and therefore people struggled to access the services they required. As awareness of the impact of abuse, as opposed to the abuse itself (services previously being directed at neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, loss etc), the terminology began to change with the concept of big 'T' trauma (often but not necessarily one off life-threatening events) and little 't' trauma (oftentimes but not always multiple experiences that leave someone feeling hopeless or helpless). However, both of these could fit with PTSD and do not necessarily meet the experience of people harmed in their childhoods. Complex trauma was coined to highlight the difference in the harm that multiple trauma caused, yet there was still a difference on those experiences in adulthood and those experienced in childhood.

Developmental trauma acknowledges the impact of trauma in our early years and how that impacts on brain development. It also acknowledges how this impact is multiplied as a result of repeated traumatic events and in addition that it is 'of human design'.

Diagnosis is often essential for treatment and support. For that reason, one of the strongest arguments in favour of the new diagnoses' centres on increasing access to services. This is especially pertinent to the looked after and adopted population who are more often than not victims of childhood trauma and one of the most vulnerable to poor psychosocial outcomes in our society.

Another significant issue that comes with the understanding of this area of trauma is where misdiagnosis occurs. Developmental trauma can and does share similar symptoms to ADHD (Attention Deficit, Hyperactivity Disorder), ODD (Opposition Defiance Disorder), Autistic Spectrum, Asperger's, Dissociative Identity Disorder, Dyspraxia, Dyslexia etc. some of these are significantly different diagnoses and some can be symptoms of Developmental Trauma. Thus, with early intervention, whilst comorbidity is always possible, unnecessary interventions are more likely to be avoided.

"You are mistaken if you think we have to lower ourselves to communicate with children. On the contrary, we have to reach up to their feelings, stretch, stand on our tiptoes."

Janusz Korczak 1925

